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A CHRISTMAS HOME-COMING

RUNA



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"When the candles in the Christmas tree were long since burnt out they sat around the hearth listening to Uncle Claus telling of some of the adventures of his life at sea."

(Page 8.)

Bestow, Elizabeth Maria

A CHRISTMAS HOME- COMING

AND

OTHER STORIES FOR CHILDREN

By RUNA c. pend.

WITH ILLUSTRATIONS



ROCK ISLAND
AUGUSTANA BOOK CONCERN

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IT WAS Christmas Eve in the little fishermen's village on the coast. Old Claus Strom was living alone in his cottage, death having robbed him of wife and children, one by one. The home was not crowded, quite the contrary; there was too much room, thought old Claus, especially at Christmas, so he had invited his niece Brita and her children to share his yuletide fare.

During his long life as a deep sea fisherman Claus had been trained to look after himself most of the time. Hence he felt no need of woman's help; no, not even in the matter of cleaning house and setting things to rights for the holidays. He even cooked the traditional rice porridge him-

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self, though Brita strenuously insisted on doing it.

"Don't you suppose I can cook just as well as you?" said the old man, brushing her aside.

What, then, could she do but sit down and watch him? Resting was to her an unusual occupation for which she seldom, if ever, found leisure. But here she now sat, with Anna in her lap and Sigrid by her side, while the open fire on the hearth burned briskly, its ruddy light bronzing the seasoned features of the old man as he slowly but handily went about his household work.

"But you will at least let me set the table," Brita again insisted.

No; the old man would not budge.

"To-night I want to be the host all by myself, and there's not a great deal to pre-side over at that," he decided.

"How you talk, uncle!" Brita thought proper to protest.

For the spread he gave them was indeed

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much better than the old man esteemed it. One could not be long in his home without feeling a sense of comfort to which now was added a touch of holiday sanctity. The parson's wife had once remarked, "Surely there must be some invisible angel presiding over that cottage of Old Claus's;" and Brita now agreed she was right. Claus was a devout old Christian, not only on Sunday or while reading his Bible, but equally so while engaged in repairing his nets, catching fish, cooking porridge, or doing any other necessary work.

"Why doesn't Gustav ever come?" asked Sigrid.

"Well, he surely ought to be back from the parsonage by this time," her mother avowed, casting an anxious glance at the old clock which stood in a corner ticking very loudly, as if desirous of impressing all with the inexorable flight of time.

"He has hardly had time to do that errand yet; and before he has done what

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he is told, no real boy will quit and go home," the old man moralized.

The words were scarcely out of his mouth when there was violent stamping of feet on the flagstone landing outside and the door was thrown open. A husky boy of fourteen entered. This was Gustav, Brita's youngest son and the only one of her boys now at home. Eric was with his father on a light ship far out at sea, and Nils, the oldest, was sailing the seas no one knew where, for not a word from him had reached home for the past two years. Gustav, too, wanted to become a sailor, but his mother held back, maintaining that the sea might leave her one boy, at least.

The lad gave an account of himself and then took a seat by the fire to dry his clothes.

"It's beastly weather out," he said. "Rain and snow mixed, and the way the wind is blowing we'll soon have a real blizzard."

"God help all seafaring folk — there's

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no yuletide cheer for them," Brita sighed devoutly.

"There are worse storms than blizzards raging in this world," uncle Claus added. "God grant they don't drive life's seafarers on the rocks."

While the porridge was sputtering in the pot, which reeled on its tripod and threatened to founder under Gustav's vigorous stirring, the little girls lit the candles in the Christmas tree. Uncle Claus took his Bible from the shelf, and when the Christmas hymn had been sung by all, he read the Christmas text — the story of the Christ-child in the manger.

Every moment the storm grew more violent, the sleet pattering sharply against the window panes, while the roar of the breakers was heard singing the song of the sea in profound bass. How weak the voice of man in comparison! The roar seemed to mock at the feeble voice of the old man who was faltering out with much feeling the simple story of Bethlehem.

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What could this Child accomplish in a world of sin and defiance against God? Yet he knew the power of the Christ-child from personal experience, and his old eyes brightened at the thought. Not only the elements must obey when Christ commands, "Peace, be still;" — even the raging waves of sin and the stormy defiance of the human heart must subside at His word. Knowing this, old Claus Strom had in his heart that peace and fortitude which none of the many inner and outer storms that ravaged his life had been able to disturb.

So his home, too, was full of peace, even on this stormy Christmas Eve. And so comfortable and contented were the children and their mother that it was hard for them to leave for their own home. When they had finished the ample meal prepared for the festive evening and the candles in the Christmas tree were long since burnt out, they still sat around the hearth listening to Uncle Claus telling of some of the

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adventures of his life at sea. However simple his narrative, his words gripped his hearers and held their attention as in a vice. Added to the pleasure of listening to his vivid accounts he gave them something of greater value by showing them the hand of God in all the events of his life, even before he himself had come to know and love God.

Host and guests alike regretted the rapid flight of the hours this night. They would gladly have sat talking and listening yet a while but for their decision to attend the Christmas services early the next morning together, and that called for retirement in due time so as not to let the sandman disturb their devotion in church. Brita and her children therefore departed for their near-by cottage at this point, all with profuse thanks for the excellent entertainment.

When Claus Strom was alone, he tidied up the room a bit and laid out his holiday attire in readiness for the morning. He

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was just getting ready to retire when a sound arrested his attention. He stood silent and listened. Was it a distress signal gun or merely a heavy onslaught of the waves upon the rocks? He hastened to the door, threw it open and peered into the darkness. It must have been a signal of distress, and not the first one, for down at the pier there was already consternation on every side. Lanterns were gleaming and swinging, loud voices were heard commanding and answering. In less than two minutes old Claus was in his oilskins and making for the beach on the run.

There he found gathered almost the whole population of the village. Several signal guns had been heard, and from the direction whence the sound had come the conclusion was that a vessel had grounded on the Shell Banks. One lifeboat already had gone to the rescue, and another was being manned to set out.

"Who will go with me?" old Claus demanded.

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No one answered. The bravest had already left with the first boat.

"My boat is old like myself," said Claus, "but we have weathered many a storm when bigger craft have foundered," he added by way of encouragement.

A couple of young men seemed disposed to join him, but their folks kept them back.

"If no one else will, I go alone," he said resolutely.

They sought to dissuade him, but to no avail. The old sea-dog proceeded to hoist his sail.

"I'll go with you, Uncle Claus!" shouted a boyish voice through the whistling storm.

"Thank you, my brave lad," said the old man looking suddenly up.

This was no time for many words.

Preparations had to be made quickly; every moment's delay might cost a human life. The old man and the boy worked in desperate haste to rig the craft. Once in

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his old fishing smack, old Claus was young again, the sea was his element, and he and the storm were old friends from away back.

"Gustav! Gustav! — Where are you?" a woman's voice called out anxiously in the crowd.

Gustav pretended not to hear, but Uncle Claus answered in his stead, and the next moment the boy's mother stood beside the boat that was being launched.

"You don't mean to start out, do you?" she inquired with misgivings.

"Yes, I am going," said Claus. "When God and duty bid me brave the storm, I am safer there than in the calmest harbor."

"But Gustav must stay with me," demanded Brita, throwing both arms around her boy.

He attempted to free himself, but the old man gave him a quick, speaking look.

"Without your mother's blessing you can't come with me," he said.

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"Mother, please let me go," the boy pleaded.

"How could I?" moaned the mother.

Now the boat was ready. Old Claus ran aft to shift the rudder before starting. To manage a skiff alone in such a storm looked impossible, to say nothing of the chance to save lives, but the old fisherman felt God's call and did not hesitate.

Mother Brita fought a short but decisive battle with her heart, then she released the boy.

"I see now that the Lord needs you. Go. I give you as an offering to God," she said, her voice wavering between despair and heroic courage.

The boy gave a hasty look at his mother, implying a silent prayer for forgiveness for not replying when she called him and for resenting her efforts at holding him back. Time was too short for words. In the nick of time he sprang into the boat.

"My boy, give your heart to God, and

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may you grow to be a man in this storm," said Uncle Claus comfortingly. And just as they were disappearing in the darkness he shouted back this word of comfort for the mother:

"Be of good cheer. The one you gave to God is safe."

With deft hand the experienced old sailor managed his craft in the choppy sea. Through the pitchy blackness he had to steer haphazard, guided only by his seaman's instinct. The winds jammed the taut sail to the breaking point, and the old smack shook and shivered, while working its way through the hissing whitecaps. The brave sailors were showered with spray, and at times the boy knew not whether he was still in the boat.

Presently an enormous wall of water threatened to fall upon the little craft and bury it.

"Now, then," the old man addressed his boat, just as a rider urging his horse to a fine leap. As if the craft had understood,

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it reared and took the obstacle with a bound, cutting gaily through the surge back of it.

Old Claus, bending forward, peered sharply ahead. To any but a seasoned seaman such efforts would have been in vain, but he knew his bearings well, calculating the height of the meeting waves by the varying strength of the gale, and computing his course by the direction from which the thunder of the breakers could be heard.

Gustav had all that he could do to bail out the water as fast as it came dashing in over the boards. At every turn he had to be strictly about his business. To the Shell Banks the distance was not far, but as the wind bore directly from that quarter, they had to zig-zag their way through, taking a new tack every few minutes.

Suddenly the darkness began to yield before a grayish haze, and a little later the moon broke through a rent in the racing clouds. In the light old Claus

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could discern a dark object looming up over the Banks. With a whispered prayer, he set the sail for a direct course and called out to Gustav to bail with redoubled vigor, for there was no more time for tacking. It was now a race with death, and there was not a moment to lose.

At length they reached the grounded ship. To go alongside old Claus would not venture for fear of having his boat crushed against its side, but he stood by, while both kept a sharp lookout for members of the shipwrecked crew.

A faint cry was heard near by, and the next instant some one was hurled towards them from the crest of a great wave.

With every nerve strained, Gustav stood ready to grasp the drowning man. For one second he came within his reach, and, crooking his leg around the edge of the side bench, he seized hold of him and by exerting every ounce of strength succeeded in pulling him into the boat without assistance.



"At first Nels thought that it was fun to dance with Bumburro to the accompaniment of the hand organ."

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Many anxious hours Brita spent on the beach, awaiting with many others the return of the life-savers. The first two boats returned with a goodly cargo — eight men rescued from the sea. But there were more still on the wreck, so they set out again. On their second return they brought in no more victims of the disaster, only the news that the derelict had slid off the rocks and sunk, and that there were no living beings in sight, and no calls for help to be heard.

“Didn’t you see my boy and Uncle Claus?” asked Mother Brita eagerly.

No, not a trace of them.

“But that isn’t saying they aren’t safe,” added one of the fishermen consolingly. “The seas are so high we might easily have passed them at close range without seeing them.”

The rescued members of the crew were brought up to the cottages for further care, while the rescuers each sought his own home and bed to get a few hours of

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needed rest. A small group still remained at the pier, watching for any of the shipwrecked crew that might be drifting about. Brita kept wringing her hands in the agony of suspense, and a couple of young men were moved by her despair to start out on a search when another glint of moonlight showed the missing boat laboring in the breakers.

"There they are!" shouted several voices at the same time.

In the darkness the smack had got to land without being seen from the shore.

"Mother, we have saved three, and you can't guess who the third one is," Gustav called out as soon as they got within hailing distance.

Many willing hands helped to rush the victims to shelter, as the old man and the boy moored the boat and further directed the rescue work.

The eyes of Mother Brita were fixed on a pale young man who was first lifted ashore. It was Nils, her oldest son. They

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placed him on the ground for a moment and administered a reviving draught, while Gustav rubbed his hands and arms, the head of the long-lost son meanwhile resting in his mother's lap.

Her face was as pale as his. Was this a reality, or all a dream? She could hardly believe her own eyes, as they rested on the loved one just now snatched from the jaws of death. But would he live? she asked herself. Had he been taken from a watery grave only to be laid in an earthen one?

At that moment Nils opened his eyes and met her anxious look.

"Mother," he whispered faintly, and her heart leaped with joy as she saw her Nils returning to life.

"Brita, have you any regrets now?" asked old Uncle Claus tenderly. "You just gave one son to the Lord, and He's given you back two. You see, that's His way," he commented.

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Brita was unable to reply. The moment seemed too sacred for words.

Deep ringing tones broke the silence. It was the church bells calling the people to early morning services by candlelight. Claus Strom uncovered his head; all the men and boys did likewise, and the women devoutly folded their hands.

“Glory be to God in the highest, and on earth peace, good will toward men,” the old man repeated when the bells ceased ringing; and never had he praised the Lord from so full a heart. From their hearts, too, came the “amen” of the bystanders.

So solemn a Christmas service no one of them had ever known before.



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NILS, it must be said, was not inclined to obedience. To school he went only when it pleased him, and this was not often, for he usually played truant. But one day his father heard how Nils had given himself many extra holidays, and the result was that father and son had a serious interview in the woodshed. from which the latter emerged painfully conscious of the skill and strength of his father in applying the birch. Thereupon he was ordered back to school with the information that if he played truant again, there would be further applications of the salutary birch. Nils started off, but on the way he sat down to cry out his defiance and rage, and to cudgel his brains for a means to avoid both school and punishment.

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As he sat there pondering, a hand was laid on his shoulder; and when he raised his head, he beheld a swarthy face smiling down on him so that the chalk-white teeth gleamed in the sun. The man addressed Nils in a peculiar lingo of which he could make out only the question: "Why are you crying?"

"Because I have to go to school," Nils replied.

"Why do you have to? Come with me instead," the stranger urged, making his meaning clear by lively gestures.

Nils eyed him with astonishment, and noted that the man was carrying a large, chest-like object on his back. It must be a hand organ, Nils thought. Back of this he spied a dark-brown, shaggy animal.

"Who are you, and where are you going?" inquired Nils.

"I am an Italian, and I travel the world over wherever it pleases me," the stranger said.

That certainly sounded alluring to Nils.

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"But what do you do?" he asked.

"I play the hand organ."

"And what am I to do if I go with you?" Nils inquired cautiously.

"Whatever you wish, especially if you will learn to dance with Bumburro, my bear. He is so tame and gentle that you need not fear him at all."

With these words the Italian pointed to the shaggy bear sitting upon his haunches and peering at them with small, melancholy eyes in his huge head.

"Dare I pat him?" asked Nils with a mingling of eagerness and fear.

"Pat away; he wouldn't hurt a flea," declared the Italian.

Thereupon Nils patted the bear, who submitted meekly.

The thought of going out into the wide world and doing what he pleased, instead of sitting obediently on a school bench was very alluring to Nils.

"I'll go with you," he declared at last.

The Italian seemed pleased as he

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trudged off with his hand organ on his back, the bear at his heels, and Nils bringing up the rear. Nils threw a lingering look of triumph back over the neighborhood of home, which he was now to leave. It vexed him that his schoolmates could not behold his triumphant departure. How they would have envied him his good fortune! But he did not dare to whistle for them when he passed the schoolhouse. Instead he made himself as small as possible, hiding behind the Italian and his organ, so that no one would detect his flight and hinder it.

He managed to pass the schoolhouse without detection, but he did not feel perfectly safe until they had reached a neighborhood where no one knew him.

At first Nils thought that it was fun to dance with Bumburro to the accompaniment of the hand organ; but one day when it was very hot, he stretched himself on the ground and declared that Bumburro would have to dance alone. The bear also

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looked dejected and tired and did not want to dance any more than Nils did. But his master had a whip which soon brought poor Bumburro to terms.

The organ grinder let Nils lie idly in the grass, while he played and bruin danced. But when Nils afterwards demanded his share of the money, the organ grinder firmly refused with the terse remark: "No work, no pay." Still worse, Nils did not get a bite to eat that day. This was repeated until Nils, much to his vexation, realized that his case was much like Bumburro's: both must dance whether they wished to or not. And the farther they progressed into the world, the greater were the demands made upon poor Nils. Now he often had to carry the hand organ until he was ready to sink to the ground, and he was forced to dance when his entire body ached with weariness. If at any time he refused to obey, he, too, would get a taste of the whip. Often he had to go about with hat in hand begging, and more

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than once his cruel master forced him to steal. No longer did the Italian share with him the money procured; never a penny did Nils get and seldom was he given sufficient food to satisfy his hunger.

Nils was beginning to think about returning home, but the way was long and unknown to him; and besides, he did not see how he would be able to escape the watchfulness of his master.

In the course of their wanderings the two travelers had by this time penetrated into the wooded and mountainous regions of the North. There Bumburro suddenly awakened to new life. He scented with evident delight the great, fragrant forest, and growled softly. There came a haunted look into the small, melancholy eyes. He seemed to know that here, in the depths of the forest, was his real home, and here he would find others of his own kind. When Bumburro displayed his uneasiness, his master would jerk the chain roughly, and if the bear answered with a growl, he

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would be lashed cruelly. For the master was strong, and when angry, laid on with all his might.

One night they were resting in a deserted barn. Nils, however, was wakeful and lay gazing at the moonlight filtering through the cracks. The moonlit night was calling him to come out. Would he dare? What if the Italian should wake? But his master's loud snoring reassured him. He had been drinking during the evening and was now lost to the world. So favorable an opportunity for flight might not present itself again. He got up cautiously and tiptoed over to the door.

It took some time to open the door, for he had to do so without making a noise. At last he succeeded and was just slipping out when a subdued growl from Bumburro checked him. To Nils it seemed as if the poor animal were chiding him in this wise:

“Have you the heart to go forth to freedom and leave me here in captivity?”

No, Nils did not have such a heart. So,

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with peril to his own freedom, he crept back and unfastened Bumburro's chain. Then both stealthily make their way toward the door.

Suddenly the snoring ceased. Both boy and bear stopped and stood motionless as statues.

"Lie still, you rascal, or I'll whip you," mumbled the Italian in his sleep; then he turned over and was soon snoring as vociferously as before.

Nils and Bumburro hesitated a while before they dared to go farther. Finally they reached the door, which had to be opened wider in order to allow Bumburro to pass through.

The night was fresh and bright. A fragrance of pine needles and resin was wafted to them from the great forest. Bumburro drew a deep breath and expelled it so forcibly that Nils in fright pinched the bear's ear to remind him of the sleeping master within. Bumburro then began to scamper off toward the forest and Nils

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followed on the run. The nearer they came to the woods, the faster grew the bear's pace. Though Nils ran with all his might, he was being left behind. Suddenly the bear stopped and gazed on his panting companion.

"Climb on my back," the bear seemed to say.

Nils understood and obeyed. Away they went so fast that the wind whistled about Nils's ears although the night was perfectly calm.

Bumburro did not stop when he reached the edge of the forest, but kept on with undiminished speed until he had penetrated to the very heart of it. When he finally halted, Nils slid from his back, and was startled to note the change that had taken place in his dear old friend.

Surely, this was not the same meek bear who under the lash had danced wearily and sadly to the tune of the discordant old hand organ. Now Bumburro stood before him grand and stately as a mon-

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arch in his kingdom. The small eyes glittered and gleamed with some mighty purpose, while Nils stood there curiously eager to see what would happen next.

As if having come to a decision, Bumburro went up to a tall pine and began to climb it. Slowly, but with deft, powerful movements the ascent was made.

Nils did not long remain a mere spectator; he also started to climb, and soon he was sitting beside his friend near the top of the pine, which swayed under their combined weight.

A bright full moon was shining over the tree tops. So dense was the forest that it seemed to Nils as if he were sitting in a rocking hammock in the midst of a green-carpeted plain. As a mere dot in the distance he could see the barn where the Italian in all probability was still snoring and dreaming that bear and boy were still within reach of his whip.

Suddenly Bumburro uttered a growl so

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loud and terrifying that Nils came near tumbling down from his lofty perch.

“What do you mean?” Nils demanded in a tone of vexation.

But Bumburro paid no heed to Nils, for he was listening intently for more distant sounds. And sure enough, as a faint echo from the depths of the forest came an answering growl.

There were other bears in the woods. This fact was just as uncomfortable to Nils as it seemed pleasing to Bumburro.

As if suspecting the boy's anxiety, the bear looked at him with an air of protection and licked his hand. This, however, he did with difficulty, for the muzzle was still on Bumburro's nose. Nils reflected that this must be humiliating for the monarch of the forest, so he unfastened it and flung it away with all his might. It fell against a rock with a metallic clink.

The delight of Bumburro was almost pathetic to behold. Joyously he opened

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his mouth to its greatest width and stretched out his tongue full length.

After a while the two friends descended from the tree and proceeded further into the forest. Now and then Bumburro sent forth a growl, and when the answering growl was heard, he made his way in that direction.

Nils was afraid that the other bear would eat him up. He tried to make plain his fears to Bumburro and to induce him to alter his course, but Bumburro remained deaf to his prayers.

Finally the two bears met and began negotiations for the forming of a friendly acquaintanceship. At first this was undertaken with due solemnity, but little by little the ice thawed between them and they came to a mutual understanding. Bumburro was overjoyed to have found a mate, and the other bear seemed equally pleased that her days of solitude were over.

Soon they began to play with each oth-

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er. To Nils the sport seemed rather rough, displaying incredible agility and strength in spite of seeming clumsiness. Nils forgot his fears in pure delight at the sport, and without being aware of it he began to clap his hands and shout bravoos at them.

The play stopped short, and the strange bear eyed Nils with an expression that caused the poor lad to quake in his boots. Then and there Nils would no doubt have furnished a meal for a hungry bear, but Bumburro intervened and made it perfectly plain to his mate in emphatic bear language that the boy belonged to them and must be treated as a friend by both. The strange bear growled unwilling consent and refrained from laying violent paws on Nils.

Nils, however, continued to feel uneasy and would have preferred to steal away, but this he did not do, partly because he did not know where to go, and partly because the bears would not permit him to leave them.

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So Nils had to live with them in the forest and spend the nights in their cave. They would never allow him out of their sight, as if they feared that he would seek out human beings and betray to them his four-footed companions.

Poor Nils did not have a very pleasant time of it. He often witnessed the bears strike down a calf, a cow, or a sheep. To Nils were left what remnants there were, but not even these could he eat unless he was threatened with death by starvation, for he had to eat his portion raw as the bears did. The bears would not permit him to make a fire either to cook his meat or to warm himself. They became perfectly wild when he tried it one day, and even Bumburro's eyes gleamed with fear and anger so fiercely that Nils thought it best to put out the fire.

He grew thin and pale from the unaccustomed food. Besides he lived in constant fear of Bumburro's mate, who continued to look upon Nils with hostile eyes

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and was only prevented by Bumburro from devouring the lad.

“What will become of me if she becomes real hungry some day, when we two are alone?” mused Nils, and kept himself more closely to the side of Bumburro.

Then winter came, and the bears began their period of hibernation after first having gorged themselves with meat. How they did eat! And not a single bite for poor Nils. When they retired into their cave, Nils was forced to follow their example. He wept and moaned from the pangs of hunger; but little did the bears care, for they were full to satiety and promptly fell asleep.

After some time Nils tried to creep out of the cave, but the strange bear woke up and growled ominously. So Nils crept back to Bumburro and lay there weeping from hunger and despair. His thoughts turned yearningly to his distant home, his parents, his brothers and sisters, and many companions. Alas, nevermore would

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he see them! Here he would lie until he died from hunger and cold. As he lay musing thus sadly, he noticed that snow was beginning to fall outside. The white flakes fell so silently and peacefully that they somewhat soothed his troubled feelings. Presently Nils noticed that a huge drift was piling up before the mouth of the cave. Soon the opening would be entirely closed, and Nils would be sealed up as in a dark tomb. He realized that now if ever he must make good his escape. If the bears hindered him, they might as well eat him up at once. Far better to die quickly than to suffer a lingering death in this tomb-like cave.

Slowly and cautiously he raised himself up and began to crawl away more noiselessly even than when he fled from the Italian organ-grinder. This time the bears were sleeping so profoundly that they were not disturbed by the flight of Nils.

So great was his happiness and relief that he could scarcely believe that he had

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escaped from the bear-cave. But this was no time to give himself up to vain rejoicing. Where should he go, and on what should he subsist? Round about him for miles stretched the vast, trackless forest, offering nothing better than snow for him to live upon.

Poor Nils roamed about in the forest for a long, long time, and at last he lay down in a snowdrift to die, thinking it not worth while to struggle for his life any longer.

As he lay there weeping, he thought again of his father and mother, and how naughty he had been to run away from them. Now he would not even have a chance to ask their forgiveness. This was his last sad thought before he lost consciousness.

But he did not die. When he woke to consciousness again, he was still on earth. He found himself lying on a bed of spruce brush in a little forest hut. On a stone slab in a corner a fire was burning, the

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smoke from which escaped through a hole in the roof. The light from the fire lit up the face of a man. Nils stirred to look at him.

"So you are coming to," the man remarked, giving Nils something warm to drink.

How good it was! Nils felt a glow of new life streaming through his benumbed limbs.

"How did I get here?" he asked wonderingly.

"I found you in a snowdrift and brought you here," the man replied.

Nils sent him a look of gratitude and inquired who he was.

"My name is Mats and I live here in the woods through the winter to chop trees and burn charcoal. But tell me, who are you, and where do you come from?"

Nils told him frankly all that he had passed through from the day he had run away from home to the moment when he fell asleep in the snowdrift.

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"A strange story," remarked Mats. "A very strange story. And yet so true to life. If you won't obey those who only wish you well, you are sure to get sterner masters, cruel masters, whom you will have to obey whether you wish to or not. That's the way matters shape themselves in life."

Nils made no reply; but the more he pondered on the words of Mats, the more he came to realize how true they were.

Nils staid on with Mats through the winter, helping with his work. No chance now to idle his time away; but hard labor from morning till night and a hard bed to sleep on. But never had Nils slept more soundly than on his spruce brush couch in the charcoal burner's hut. The only thing to disturb his rest was an occasional yearning for home and parents.

At last the huge snowdrifts began to dwindle, and when spring came in good earnest, the two occupants of the lonely hut set out for the settlements. They fol-

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lowed the river upon whose swelling tide many of the logs which Mats and Nils had cut were being carried down to the saw-mills.

They had traveled a considerable distance when Mats suddenly stopped.

"Here are fresh bear tracks," he declared, and began to load his gun.

Peering watchfully in all directions, they continued on their way. It is no child's play to meet bruin when he emerges from his winter quarters in the spring, gaunt and hungry from his protracted period of fasting.

Suddenly they heard a growl and saw a shaggy object moving clumsily among the trees. Just as Mats threw up his gun to fire, Nils shouted:

"Don't shoot! That's my old friend Bumburro!"

To the utter consternation of Mats, Nils leaped into the very arms of the bear. Bumburro sniffed and sneezed, and when Nils spoke to him and stroked his nose,

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the bear's growl became a gentle murmur of delighted recognition.

It was hard to decide which of the two friends was the happier at this unexpected meeting.

All this while Mats stood as if turned to stone, and of course, without a thought of shooting.

"Come on, Nils," he finally said, "we have a long way to travel before night-fall."

When they started off, the bear followed them until they approached the settlement at the edge of the forest. There Bumburro stopped.

Nils wound his arms about his friend's neck and fondled the great head with genuine regret at parting. He was not ashamed of the tears that came to his eyes; but he consoled himself with the thought that he was leaving his old friend in full enjoyment of freedom, and as the proud monarch of the forest. Finally he tore himself away from Bumburro and

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hurried after Mats who had continued on his way.

When left alone, Bumburro swung himself upon a high rock and clambered from there into the leafless branches of a tall tree, from which he followed with his gaze his departing friend as long as he was in sight. The last time Nils turned around, he thought he could discern the head of a second bear beside that of his friend.

"It's a good thing the other bear didn't come first." Nils exclaimed.

"Shall we go back and take a crack at it?" asked Mats.

"No, no," cried Nils. "It's Bumburro's mate, and suppose you shot Bumburro by mistake!"

"I never shoot anything by mistake," Mats declared. "I always hit my mark. But to please you, I'll forego my bear hunt this time. They didn't harm you when you were in their power, and I'll spare them now. One must be just even toward beasts, and not return evil for good."

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Mats was much given to pondering, and as they went along, Nils could see that he was thinking deeply upon some subject.

"I must confess," he finally burst out, "that I didn't put much faith in your wonderful bear story. I concluded that you dreamt it while you were sleeping in the snowdrift. But I see now that your story was all true. I have been ruminating on what it could be that saved you from being devoured by the bears. That Bumburro left you alone is only natural, as he was your friend and companion. But the other bear — that is harder to explain."

"She didn't dare to touch me for Bumburro," Nils declared.

But Mats only shook his head.

"It was not only Bumburro," he asserted. "Your real protector, as I see it, was, no doubt, the same One who stopped the lion's mouth in the case of Daniel in the pit."

"You mean God," said Nils soberly.

"I do," said Mats.

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"But I was such a wicked boy. How could God want to protect me? God would only have treated me as I deserved, if He had allowed me to be devoured."

"That's true enough," declared Mats calmly, "but rather than let you die in your wickedness, God wished to give you time to become good. You see that's always his way."

Nils was deeply moved by these words, and never in his life had he felt so great a desire to become good.

After a long and weary tramp, Mats and his companion finally reached the village. The first thing that Mats did was to conduct Nils to the village parson. After much questioning the parson discovered the name of the distant village where the parents of Nils lived, and then he provided means for his journey home.

"Now see to it that you grow up to become a sturdy man and strong as a bear to resist all evil," was the parting advice of Mats.

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Great was their joy when Nils returned to his own folks. Father and mother could hardly believe their eyes when they beheld their son, whom they had thought dead, standing before them hale and hearty. Not a single word of reproach did he receive; nor did he need any, for he returned home a different and a better boy than when he ran away.



HOLD FAST THY CROWN



I

The rite of confirmation was finished, the children had for the first time partaken of the Lord's Supper, and now they were grouped about their pastor to receive their certificates. He also gave to each a book as a remembrance of their winter's work together. On the fly-leaf of each book was inscribed the name of the recipient and under the name this Bible verse:

"Hold fast that which thou hast, that no one take thy crown."

The same verse was written in each book, and the words of farewell, uttered by the pastor, directed the children's attention to the crown.

"Remember," he said, "that you have a crown that may be lost, and hold fast to it!"

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The final words of parting had been said, and the children departed — departed, as it were, from days of childhood into the larger sphere of youthful life and activity. And as they went, their ways led them in different directions.

II

Agda returned to the little shop where she was employed. Many duties awaited her there.

“I am glad that your confirmation is a thing of the past so that I need no longer be without your help several hours a week, busy as we are,” exclaimed Agda’s mistress, who was always harassed and nervous, driving herself as well as others to the utmost.

As Agda worked she wondered if she would be able to retain the impressions she had received during the period of instruction for her confirmation. She knew that she had no quiet hours to look forward to, and in the midst of her endless la-

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bors it was so difficult to concentrate her thoughts on higher things. But Agda did not wish to lose her crown, and so she prayed that Jesus might preserve it for her and her for it.

Such was the burden of her prayer late one evening as she was scrubbing the floor of the shop. As she was scouring away with her brush and wiping up the soap-suds, she was thinking of her crown, and despite her humble task her heart was filled with sacred peace. She felt that she was not alone in the shop though no other human being was present. The thought that Jesus was near so filled her heart with gladness that she would have burst into song had not her hard task made her so breathless that singing was out of the question.

It seemed to her that Jesus was saying: "Scrub this floor well for me!"

And so, indeed, she did. Every spot and every corner was scoured clean and white.

When her task was ended, she was per-

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mitted to go home to bed. But her poor little back ached so hard that she could not sleep for a long time.

Agda might well have had reason to complain that the work assigned to her was too heavy for her frail strength, but she had her own way of looking at this matter. Was she not working for Jesus? And if her back ached a little for His sake, how much greater had not His suffering and anguish been for her sake!

Without knowing it, Agda was living her toilsome life as a true heroine. Patiently she bore her cross in the footsteps of Jesus, and she kept her eyes so steadfastly on the Master that she did not notice the weight of the cross she bore.

And as she journeyed on for the few remaining years of her life, she reached the moment at last when her cross was exchanged for a crown — —

“Poor little Agda!” murmured her few sorrowing friends as they lowered her body into the grave on a bright spring day

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just four years after her confirmation. "She was not strong enough to endure the toil and drudgery of life, and so she died so young, poor child!"

"Happy little Agda!" caroled the angels of heaven when they bore her soul on high. "In a small way you were faithful to your Saviour even unto death; therefore He now bestows on you the crown of life. Happy little Agda!"

III

Few, indeed, were those who had followed Agda to the grave. Besides her sister and mistress and a few companions there were only two others present: a poor working woman and her son. There were tears in the woman's eyes, but the youth gazed with dry eyes and gloomy mien down into the grave. Agda and he were of equal age, had lived near each other, and had been good friends from earliest childhood, and besides, they had belonged to the same confirmation class. Gunnar

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had done what he could to ease the sad lot of his friend, but as his wages were small and his time taken up, he had not been able to do much.

Silent and sad, mother and son turned away from the grave and departed from the churchyard.

Just then a fine carriage occupied by several well-dressed persons rolled by them on the highway. Gunnar's eyes burning with hatred followed the carriage, and his hands were tightly clenched.

"Mother," he said, "if we had owned only half of what those fine people possess, we might have hindered Agda's death."

She looked at him and was startled at his aspect.

"Beware of such thoughts, Gunnar; they will only make your heart hard and bitter," she cried.

"And if they do, can you wonder at it?" he retorted.

Hatred of the well-to-do seathed in Gunnar's heart, and every time he thought of

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Agda's sad fate, this hatred burst into a fierce flame. As time passed Gunnar became one of the leaders in his labor union, and whenever opportunity offered he was quick to fan the flame of discontent and hatred toward the so-called upper classes. He became a leader in all strike movements and was unsparing in his criticism of all those who refused to go out on strike.

"O Gunnar, you are growing so harsh and bitter! Where will it all end?" sighed the mother.

"Don't sigh over me," he retorted. "Sigh over all the wrong and injustice in the world."

"It isn't so bad as you think," protested his mother. "If you could look into the homes of the wealthy, you would find no greater happiness there than in the cottages of the poor."

"I know nothing about that," Gunnar replied. "I only know that if Agda had not been so poor she might be living still."

"I don't believe," replied the mother,

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“that she would be willing to exchange her present lot and return to earth, even if she could live in regal state.”

“That’s a mere empty phrase to silence the ‘stones that cry out,’ ” replied Gunnar fiercely. “But cry out we will until the heavens crack and fire falls upon the rich and mighty whose hearts are in their money-bags.”

The mother’s only answer was a sigh which served only to drive Gunnar fuming from the house.

A strike had just been declared at the great factory where Gunnar was employed. Some of the workmen had refused to walk out. These strike-breakers must now be brought to their senses and compelled to take part in the strike.

Gunnar met one of these and proceeded to beat him up when he would not listen to reason. During the progress of the fight Gunnar grew wild with passion and hit harder than he knew. Suddenly Ernst Bengtsson, his antagonist, fell to the

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ground, blood streaming from his nose and mouth. He lay perfectly still, but Gunnar was not to be frightened.

"Don't play 'possum with me! You're far from dead yet," Gunnar cried, poking the fallen man savagely with his foot.

A cry of pain was heard, confirming Gunnar's declaration that the man was far from dead yet.

"Help me up!" moaned the stricken man.

"Sure, if you have had enough to make you remember not to be a strike-breaker again," Gunnar declared as he raised him to his feet and helped him on his way home.

There they found the injured man's wife with a little child on her arm, busily engaged in preparing the evening meal, while three older children were romping about the humble home. When they noticed the condition of their father, the children grew suddenly still and the mother became pale as death. Without a word

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she placed the little one in the cradle and helped Gunnar put her husband to bed.

"How did this happen?" she stammered as she carefully removed her husband's clothing.

She looked at Gunnar, but he neither met her gaze nor answered. Then she turned to her husband, but he, too, remained silent. She could see that he had been in a fight, but he was perfectly sober and so was the other man. Who, then, had beat him up?

"Never mind how it happened," her husband said feebly, for he had, indeed, been severely handled.

Gunnar offered to fetch a doctor.

Then the wife remembered that she had not thanked Gunnar for helping her husband, and she hastened to do so now.

"Don't thank me!" Gunnar said hastily as he hurried off to summon a doctor.

As it was growing late, Gunnar had some difficulty in finding a doctor and

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sending him to Bengtsson's home. Then he set out for his own home.

He found the house dark, as his mother had been called out to do night scrubbing in an office building.

Suddenly Gunnar remembered something which had deeply impressed him when he was preparing for his confirmation, namely, the words about Judas: "He then having received the sop went out straightway: and it was night." At this moment Gunnar felt as if these words applied to him. He hastened to light the lamp, but this did not dispel the darkness in his soul. The silence of the innocent comrade whom he had manhandled, and the poor wife's unmerited thanks made him feel more like a Judas than the benefactor and hero he had considered himself.

The accusing voice of conscience battled victoriously against the doctrine of hate which filled Gunnar's heart. In vain he tried to persuade himself that he had beaten Bengtsson simply because the

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man did not know enough to stand up for his rights, and so this had to be hammered into him. The voice of conscience persistently asked in what respect the poor man was the gainer as a result of his bodily injuries and the fact that he was no longer able to work for the support of himself and family.

Perhaps he was not the gainer, Gunnar admitted — not he himself, not for the time being — but was it not necessary to sacrifice the individual for the public good, temporary advantage for future progress?

IV

The following day Gunnar was drawn irresistibly to Bengtsson's home. The man was worse and had a fever, but his mind was clear.

Not many words were exchanged between the two men, but when Gunnar left he carried away with him a pain in his own soul which caused him as much suffering as the injuries he had inflicted upon

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Ernst Bengtsson. The expression in the sick man's eyes, though without malice, had seemed to say to him, "Why did you do this to me?"

However much Gunnar tried to excuse himself, this question burned deeper and deeper into his soul. He had no peace night or day, and he found it impossible to undertake anything to distract his mind.

Bengtsson grew steadily worse. The support of the family now fell upon the poor wife's shoulders, and as she therefore could not give her husband the necessary care, he was removed to the hospital.

Not a day passed but that Gunnar visited him at the hospital, and Bengtsson's wife came as often as her laborious life permitted.

Gunnar's visits were never long, nor did he say much when he came; but without his noticing it, his hard, flinty nature grew gradually softer day by day.

One day Gunnar failed to come. When

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he appeared the next day, Bengtsson asked: "You weren't here yesterday, were you?"

"Did you miss me?" Gunnar asked with a quick, searching look.

"Yes, I did," he replied. "No one came to see me, not even my wife."

For a while Gunnar sought to repress a question he had long desired to ask.

At last he blurted it out: "Does your wife still know nothing about how it happened?"

"She has her suspicions, but she does not know who injured me," Bengtsson replied.

A lump rose in Gunnar's throat; he tried to speak but instead he rose abruptly and departed with a hasty word of farewell.

When he again called at the hospital, Bengtsson asked him how the strike was progressing.

"Negotiations are in progress and it

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looks as though we were going to win," Gunnar declared.

"I wish that other and better means than strikes could be found", sighed Bengtsson.

"Impossible! We are compelled to use force against force in our dealings with the upper classes," Gunnar declared sternly.

Just then a young nurse passed by, carrying a little sick boy in her arms. Bengtsson's eyes followed her with evident pleasure.

"Look at her," he said. "Do you know who she is?" But without awaiting Gunnar's reply he continued: "She is a young lady of wealth, belonging to that upper class which you hate and regard as the source of all evil. She is giving all her time to the sick and the needy."

"She does it then from a mere passing whim," declared Gunnar.

"No, she does it from love," the sick man replied. "There is another and a better

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way than to meet force by force, namely, to meet love by love."

"Not much love comes to us from the upper classes," Gunnar declared spitefully. "She must be an exception."

"Don't say that," insisted Bengtsson. "There are many like her. And besides, it is our duty to love even where there is no love in return."

Gunnar's eyes kindled haughtily as he replied: "That would be fine, wouldn't it! If we followed that principle, we would soon be driven into abject slavery."

"Quite the contrary!" Bengtsson asserted. "'Love your enemies!' That command was given not only to the upper class but also to us — to all alike. Hate enslaves, but love makes free. Believe me, Gunnar, there is no greater slavery than that of hate!"

Gunnar made no reply but sat staring moodily at the floor.

The sick man continued: "Hate fills the heart with unrest and bitterness, while

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love sheds light and peace on all sides. An enemy is never won over by hate; he must be won over by love alone."

Gunnar's silence remained unbroken. He wondered if the sick man was thinking now of their relations to each other; if so, then he had to admit the truth of these words.

"This is true of classes as well as of individuals," Bengtsson continued. "Love alone can smooth out all difficulties and bring about a union between the classes."

When Gunnar went home that day he had much to think about.

"Love your enemies!"

What a foolish command, he mused. He would have dismissed the words with contempt, had he not felt that he himself was the object of just such love.

How had his wounded comrade obtained such power to love? Well did Gunnar know the answer. The power came from Him who had given the command and who had fulfilled it in His own life and death. Yes,

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it was necessary to be a Christian with heart and soul in order to be able to love your enemies. Gunnar was afraid to become a Christian; for if he did, he must enter upon an entirely different way, and live for an entirely different ideal than the one which had seized upon him at Agda's death and had since then been the ruling principle of his life.

Agda! A startling thought occurred to him. What would she have said of his present ideals and aspirations? Would it have pleased her to know that her death marked the beginning of the path he was now treading? In his heart he knew that it would not have pleased her — that it would have caused her deep and bitter sorrow. She had never complained, never had she used force against the cruel hardships of her life. But therefore she had met an untimely death. Bengtsson was in many respects like Agda, and therefore he now lay sick and helpless in the hospital. Nay, their King himself, whom they were

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serving, had died on the accursed cross because of His love! Clearly, the religion He proclaimed and practiced was the religion of defeat and destruction!

So Gunnar mused; but other thoughts, other questions pressed themselves upon him for reply. Was the resurrection of Jesus a defeat? Was the triumphant progress of His kingdom on earth a defeat? Was Agda's happy assurance in the presence of death, or Bengtsson's friendly treatment of himself an evidence of defeat and failure?

Gunnar could not forget the expression in the sick man's eyes when he had solemnly declared: "An enemy is never won over by hate; he must be won by love alone."

And all the while Gunnar was unconsciously confirming the truth of these words. The man he had injured was actually winning him by his forgiveness and love; indeed, he had already won Gunnar so completely that he could no longer cherish his old ideas but felt himself irresist-

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ibly driven to adopt the views of the man whose love had conquered him.

When human love has such power, how much greater and more powerful must not Christ's love be?

Slowly Gunnar was being driven to Christ, though he realized that to accept Christ meant defeat and even death to him. He must die from his own sinful self in order to live with Christ. He must set his mind on the things that are above, not on the things that are upon the earth.

Severe, indeed, was his struggle before he was brought to the point of complete surrender. It was only after a terrible night spent at Bengtsson's bedside in momentary expectation of his comrade's death, that Gunnar's power of resistance was finally broken.

When he saw death turn aside and life return, when the awful weight of actual murder was finally lifted from his anguished soul, then he could no longer refrain from full and complete surrender.

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The love of Christ had conquered him.

Gunnar was by nature whole-hearted and sincere. What he decided to do he did thoroughly. The decision once made, he became a Christian, heart and soul, and the new life within him permeated and transformed the old ideals that he had cherished. He still strove to spread the principles of equality among his fellowmen but to meet force with force was no longer his motto. He had himself been won by the omnipotence of love; in his turn he now desired to conquer by love alone. The sad lot of the weak and poor continued to lie near to his heart, but he now deemed the hidden riches of the soul of more value than mere material prosperity. Instead of stirring up and fanning the flame of discontent he strove to inspire contentment realizing that this virtue brightens and lightens even the hardest lot. He still continued to ponder on the problem as to why there should be so much of inequality in the world, but when the sight of the

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world's misery and want threatened to embitter his heart, he would direct his thoughts to that higher world to which Agda had escaped from the grinding cares of life, and he felt assured that all of life's difficult problems would there be solved. The more he began to seek for the higher things, the less important became many of the things of this life. And though it is true that the poor and lowly must do without many of the good things of this life, yet the crown of life eternal is just as accessible to the poorest and the lowliest as to the richest and the greatest. In comparison with this crown all the world's glory seemed to Gunnar to pale into insignificance.

V

Elin and Mia were two class-mates of Agda's in the confirmation class. They had also attended her funeral although they had seldom met her after their confirmation. Even if their lives had devel-

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oped along different lines from Agda's, yet they had thought much of her and sincere were the tears they let fall upon the grave of their friend.

Elin and Mia were employed in a factory, and they found their work dull and tedious. But they had their evenings and Sundays free, and this meant much to them. They had many girl friends at the factory, and among these there were some who suggested various and often questionable ways of amusing themselves.

"Now that our confirmation is safely over, we need not be so good and pious as before," these had said to Mia and Elin.

At first the latter had endeavored to keep away from sinful pleasures, but as time passed they had yielded more and more to temptations. They were young and life's pleasures were alluring. They soon became favorites at the dance halls, and the young men vied with each other for their company at theatres and cafés. Soon these two young girls lived only for

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their pleasures, and considered their work at the factory only as a necessary evil. When they came to their work in the morning after spending more than half the night in theatres and cafés, they complained of overwork and grew dull and careless at their tasks.

Thus it came to pass that they lost what once was theirs and forgot their crowns. But there is One who seeks for those who have gone astray; and one day He confronted the two friends though they knew Him not. He laid a heavy hand on Mia and a severe illness seized upon her so that she was removed to the hospital.

Here another phase of life met her, far different from that of the dance halls and theatres. No coarse jests, no loud laughter, no wild revelry here; here solemnity and stillness, hope and fear reigned. Here she met life without illusions — life in the presence of death. Mia was terrified. It seemed to her as if she had awakened from a lurid dream to the bald realities of life

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in which her own life was but a smoldering ruin. If she should die now, what had life meant to her? Nothing — less than nothing!

It was necessary for Mia to submit to an operation and she was terribly afraid, for the doctor had not concealed from her the seriousness of her condition.

In the next bed to Mia's lay a woman who was now convalescing from the very same operation that Mia was to undergo. This woman tried to calm and cheer the young girl.

"I committed myself into the hands of God and He helped me through," she declared.

Mia made no reply, but so far from cheering her, the woman's words greatly disturbed her. More than all else she feared to commit herself into the hands of a righteous God, for had she not thrust aside His hands when they were extended to her in love?

The kind woman did not wish to trouble

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Mia with many words, but she remained seated by her side, and her presence seemed to soothe the young girl. She picked up a book lying on the stand by Mia's bed and began to turn the leaves.

"I received that book from my pastor on my confirmation day," said Mia hesitatingly.

"And did he write these words: 'Hold fast that which thou hast, that no one take thy crown'?" inquired the woman.

"He did," whispered Mia.

Her crown had been taken from her. Punishment and not a crown awaited her at the hands of God.

"Do you think I will die of the operation?" Mia suddenly asked.

"No, I do not think so. But whatever the result, you need not fear."

"O yes, I do!" cried Mia.

"Why so?" asked her new friend.

"I have gone astray from God."

"Have you fallen into sin?"

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"Well, not exactly," replied Mia. "I have really not done anything wicked."

"Why, then, are you afraid of God?"

"O, I can't tell. He seems such a stranger to me."

"Has He always seemed so?"

"No, not always."

"Poor child, have you lost your crown? Come, tell me how it happened."

"My companions led me into many things that I now regret," sighed Mia.

"Do not lay the entire blame on your companions. What could they have done if your own desires had not led in the same direction? And, besides, was there no voice calling you in the opposite direction? Did you not have to resist many loving promptings from God before you went entirely astray?"

Mia had to admit that this was true. But she declared that God had prompted her more through fear of His vengeance than through His love.

"But would it not be sweet to know that

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God is ready to pardon your neglect, to take you back though you have gone astray, and to restore the crown that you have forfeited?"

"But that He will never do!"

"O yes, He will. 'Though your sins be as scarlet, they shall be as white as snow.' "

Mia made no reply, but she pondered on this promise and laid hold on it when the hour for her operation arrived and the chloroform began to becloud her senses.

The operation which Mia had so feared was successful and her recovery was rapid and complete.

When she returned to the factory, she was greeted heartily by all her companions. Elin's greetings were especially warm; she had missed the companionship of her friend. But Elin's disappointment was great when she discovered that Mia was unwilling to enter upon their former merry life.

"No!" she declared positively. "God

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has taken me back, and now there is nothing I fear so much as to go astray from Him again. I wish to hold fast that which I have so that no one takes my crown."

This silenced Elin, and when she saw that Mia could not be induced to change her mind, she withdrew more and more from her companionship, especially as Mia would not let her pursue her own way in peace.

"Beware, Elin!" she warned. "You have entered upon a dangerous path. Turn back!"

But Elin did not heed the warning. She wished to enjoy life in her own way and seemed to care nothing for the crown. Her path led her further and further away from God until she was indeed a lost and fallen woman. The saddest was that she did not seem to realize the depth of her fall but believed that all was well.

Mia mourned deeply over the sinful folly of her friend who so thoughtlessly cast away her crown, and she prayed daily for her.



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VI

There were many other young people besides Agda and Gunnar, Elin and Mia who had received from their pastor the parting injunction: "Hold fast that which thou hast, that no one take thy crown."

When Helen and Irma went home after having received the confirmation certificates, they felt sad at heart. Both were deeply attached to their pastor and considered the past winter as the happiest period of their lives. Especially was this the case with Irma. Hers was a home of no serious religious atmosphere; her confirmation instruction had therefore opened an entirely new world to her which had won her love.

After she had parted from Helen at the gate of her home, she went from room to room seeking her mother, but no one was at home.

Sad at heart, she took her stand before a window looking out upon the River

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Road, a fashionable boulevard, but her attention was not fixed upon the gay throng of people passing below her, nor upon the glittering river or the smiling spring skies. She opened the little book she had just received and read the words written under her name: "Hold fast that which thou hast, that no one take thy crown."

The memory of all the precious things she had heard about the Saviour's great love and the heavenly mansions that He had prepared for her now caused her heart to glow with gratitude to God, and as she stood there by the window she sent to heaven a silent but fervent petition that Jesus might take her into His keeping and protect her.

Irma's parents had planned that she should make her entry into the gay world of fashionable society during the winter after her confirmation, and they were not a little astonished when their daughter manifested unwillingness to meet their wishes.

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It became, however, increasingly difficult for her to persist in her refusals, for it only served to kindle her father's wrath and to cause her mother sorrow. They could not understand her aversion to the gay life which they had planned for her. But she begged so earnestly that at first they yielded to her wishes. One evening, however, she was invited to a fashionable ball at a place to which her father insisted that she should go. No prayers were of any avail.

"You must go, and that's all there is to it!" her father declared. Never had he used such a tone of voice to her before.

"I can't understand you," her mother pouted. "You must think that we wish to bring you in contact with entirely worthless people. It is merely false pride on your part to consider yourself so much better than other people that you do not wish to associate with them."

"That is not at all what I think," declared Irma. "What I fear is that I will

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be so attracted by the gayeties of society that I will go astray from God."

"O, I do not think you need to fear that," replied the mother, who secretly thought that it would be well for Irma to dismiss from her mind some of those peculiar religious impressions which made her so unlike the care-free young people about her.

So Irma attended the ball and was charmed by its pleasures. Nor was this the last ball she attended, for now that the ice had been broken and she had accepted one invitation, she could not very well refuse others without causing bad feelings.

But all the while she was restless and ill at ease, feeling that she was denying her Saviour.

When she sought comfort and sympathy from Helen, the latter only added to the burden oppressing her.

"Why don't you take a firmer stand? If I were in your place I would simply refuse

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to enter a ball-room," declared Helen, forgetting that an opportunity for such refusal had never been given her.

In the presence of her excellent friend Irma felt guilty, and that night she cried bitter tears of sorrow and remorse. It seemed to her that the shining crown which had so attracted her was losing its luster.

"Must I either defy my parents or lose my crown?" she asked herself with increasing anxiety, as she felt herself growing daily more shallow as a result of the aimless life into which she was being drawn.

In the spring of the year after her confirmation she finished her course in the high school and determined to ask her father's permission to continue her studies for her college degree. She timed her request to the moment when he had just finished examining her certificate from the high school and had expressed his pride and satisfaction with the same. He grant-

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ed her request without much show of hesitation. To be proud of his child was the dearest wish of his heart and he felt that this wish would be gratified if he permitted his gifted daughter to continue her studies.

Irma took her work in college seriously and seldom found time to mingle with society. This was not entirely pleasing to her parents, but they realized that it would be better for her to spend her spare time in open air sports and activities and her nights in sleep than to waste her time and strength at parties and balls. Besides, her parents consoled themselves with the thought that when she had taken her degree, she would discard her studies for the gayer life of society where she would be able to play a prominent part because of her culture and talents. But in her heart Irma had other plans. These were vague as yet, but she did not doubt that when the time came she would hit upon the proper course to take in life.

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Of late there was but little intimacy between Irma and Helen. This was due partly to the fact that they now moved in different spheres and partly to the circumstance that Helen was beginning to disapprove of Irma. Helen considered that her friend had become both worldly-minded and unwomanly.

One day Helen was pouring out her regrets about Irma to her brother Axel who had also been a member of their confirmation class.

"Yes," she concluded with a sigh, "it is sad to notice all this. Well I remember the farewell words of our pastor: 'Hold fast that which thou hast, that no one take thy crown.' Poor Irma, she seems to have exchanged her crown for the vanities of the world."

Axel, who had been pacing forth and back across the room, now stopped suddenly and said: "Beware, Helen, it is also possible to forfeit the crown by self-righteousness and harsh judgment of others."

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Helen was so taken aback that she could find no word of reply.

VII

Helen's brother Axel was studying for the ministry. Erick, one of his confirmation mates and his best friend from childhood, was rooming with him at the university.

Both had set out in life with the same lofty purpose to fight the good fight of faith for the crown of life. But theirs was not a fight against "flesh and blood, but against principalities and powers and the world-rulers of this darkness." Axel was vigilant and had put on the whole armor of God in order to be able to withstand in the evil day. When doubts assaulted him, he was therefore well equipped. He bore the shield of faith which he valiantly opposed to the fiery darts of the evil one whose attacks he was therefore able to frustrate.

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Erick, however, was not so keen-eyed nor far-seeing.

"You cut short all the difficult questions of life without facing them squarely and attempting to solve them," said Erick, rebuking his friend.

"Why try to untie the hard knots that bind and fetter us?" exclaimed Axel. "Much better, then, to cut them in two as did Alexander the Gordian knot."

"That may be well enough as far as you are concerned, but most people will not be satisfied with such a way out of the difficulty," declared Erick. "And for the sake of these it is our duty to study these problems and doubts, and attempt to solve them."

"Provided only that you do not enter into them so deeply that you lose your faith!" Axel exclaimed. "You do poor service to a doubter by doubting yourself."

"If my faith is so weak that it cannot bear to be exposed to doubts, it may as well perish!" cried Erick proudly.

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"Don't you love and cherish your faith?" Axel asked.

"Why do you ask?" inquired Erick.

"You speak so unfeelingly about your faith," said Axel. "Would you think that a mother loved her child if she exposed it to contagion, saying: 'If my child is so weak that it can not withstand the contagion of diphtheria, it may as well die'?"

This silenced Erick for a moment, but suddenly with flashing eyes he rejoined: "What would you say of a physician who did not dare to enter the room of a diphtheria patient for fear of contagion?"

"I would call him a coward," Axel admitted, but added: "But I would call him a fool if he knowingly admitted the germs into his own system instead of rending them harmless."

But Erick was not yet vanquished.

"It is sometimes a duty," he retorted, "to suck poison from the wound of one who has been snake-bitten in order to save his life."

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“But one need not swallow the poison,” was Axel’s ready retort. “One will spit it all out with the greatest care. I do not mean by this that you must avoid people who are fighting with doubts, or timidly refuse to listen to them. What I do mean is that under no circumstances must you allow doubts to gain the mastery in your own soul.”

So Axel spoke, and his life was in harmony with his words. He went on his way with eye fixed upon the crown whose radiance in his eyes far excelled all earthly things. His life became a blessing and a source of strength to many a weak and erring mortal. He raised many a drowning soul up on the Rock of Ages, not by throwing himself into the waves, but by retaining a firm footing on the Rock and reaching out to lift others up.

Erick’s path through life did not extend so straight, and his steps were not so firm. He was so liberal in his views and so afraid of judging that he did not even pass

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judgment on manifest falsehood lest he should seem to judge those who advocated it. For this reason he was held in high esteem by the world at large. He exerted an influence for good, but he won more people for himself than for God, for he made use of his own well considered and well uttered views instead of proclaiming the pure gospel of Christ which is a folly and a stumbling block to those who feel no need of it. Erick lived for this life alone — a life full of uprightness and love of humanity. The crown which God had promised to the faithful he expected to win as a reward for services rendered. But this crown was not yet ready for him, nor did he expect it as a free gift of grace but only when he had earned it by a life of faithful service.

Time and again Axel warned him: "You have entered upon a dangerous way, Erick. You are drifting away from your first love; you no longer feel the need of Christ and His atonement. Hold fast your crown, lest you forfeit it."

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VIII

When Irma had taken her degree, her parents arranged for a grand reception in her honor. Among those whom Irma herself had invited were Helen and Axel. Helen sent her regrets but Axel came.

As Axel did not dance but was only an onlooker, he had ample opportunity to make his observations. He observed that Irma was courted by young and old alike, but this was only natural, he reflected, as the reception was held in her honor. Nevertheless she seemed to him more dejected than glad. Axel longed to speak to her, but as hostess she must move about and devote herself to all alike. Only for a minute or two did she linger at his side.

"What do you think of these doings?" she asked, viewing the gay throng with a pensive aspect.

"There is something enticing about it, especially to one who is not accustomed to it," he declared.

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“Yes, indeed,” she agreed, and her eyes grew troubled; but suddenly they brightened as if a pleasant thought had occurred to her, and she added: “In the darkness every light is bright, but if one walks in the light —”

She did not finish her sentence for someone came to summon her away.

Axel longed to resume the interrupted conversation, but no opportunity offered itself that evening.

The following day he was walking along the boulevard to enjoy the beautiful spring sunshine when he encountered Irma. She, too, was alone. They made no attempt to conceal from each other their mutual pleasure at the meeting. Together they proceeded along the River Road, stopped for a while on the bridge to listen to the murmur of the river along its birch-clad banks, then they continued along the path through the woods avoiding by tacit agreement the more public localities of this park-like district.

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The ensuing conversation became decisive for their life's happiness. Axel had asked Irma as to her plans for the future and had found them rather vague. One thing, only, she knew with certainty, namely, that she wished to live for God and humanity, and hold fast her crown. But as yet she was somewhat uncertain as to the best way to accomplish this. By preference she would like to become a trained nurse, but her parents had positively refused to give their consent to this. Neither did they wish that she should study medicine.

"The outlook seems rather dark just now, but I do not doubt that God will find the right place in life for me," she concluded hopefully, though her lips quivered and there was a pensive look in her eyes.

Then Axel summoned courage to ask her a question which he had long desired to ask: "Don't you think, Irma, that the right place for you is by my side?"

In a flash Irma knew that every uncer-

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tainty had been removed from her path. And when, at sundown, they descended the steep path down Birch Hill and Axel gave her his hand in support, a feeling of perfect contentment and safety filled her soul, and she poured out a silent prayer of thanksgiving to God who had given her the support and protection that she most needed. She knew from experience how difficult it was for her unaided to strive for the goal, she could, therefore, appreciate her good fortune to have obtained the life-long help of one who was striving for the same goal and kept the same crown steadily in view.

True, their youthful love encountered trials and opposition, but it not only persevered but was strengthened by these, and was finally crowned with victory.

It was Axel who proposed the plan of having a reunion of all the members of their confirmation class, and his proposal met with instant favor from the others.

One day in the beginning of May, fifteen

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years after their confirmation, the members of the class assembled — mature men and women now — around their beloved pastor. The ranks had thinned noticeably. As was to be expected, all had not been able to be reached by the call, and some of those who were invited failed to respond.

Mia occupied her old place, but the chairs on either side of her stood empty. Elin and Agda were absent. Elin had lost her crown and was now so deeply immersed in life's sinful pleasures that she no longer desired to hear God's Word. Agda had long since been removed from the world's cares and now bore her crown in the mansions above. Mia thought of her two absent classmates with a sense of loss; thanking God for the one and praying for the other.

There was one other whose gaze was fixed with deep emotion upon Agda's empty chair, and that was Gunnar. But now the memory of her no longer embittered his feelings. He knew better than to be-

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wail her fate. But the chord in his heart, which her defenceless weakness had so strongly touched, was still vibrating. No one could sympathize more deeply with the weak and needy than this burly workman with the serious countenance. He now tried honestly not to oppose force by force even in their defence. He left the avenging of all wrong to Him who judges righteously, and for his own part strove to penetrate more deeply into the law of love — nearer to Jesus Christ.

Helen and Irma sat side by side, and both were conscious of how much their relations to each other had changed since the time of their confirmation. Outwardly they were more closely bound together, as Irma was married to Helen's brother, but their friendship was not so intimate, so warm as in the days of their girlhood. What was the reason for this? Each sought the cause in herself, for both were softened by the memories aroused by this reunion.

Helen felt now that she had judged Ir-

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ma harshly and superficially and that envy had in all probability been the prime cause of their estrangement. Her brother Axel's words occurred to her, that it was possible to forfeit the crown by self-righteousness and harshness in judging others. These words had often occurred to her in the past but she had banished them; now, however, she met them squarely, bowed her head and passed judgment upon herself as in the presence of God.

Irma, on the other hand, blamed herself for not giving to Helen the trust and confidence which she expected of her in return. She had not considered the difficulties Helen had to contend with, but only expected that the latter should sympathize with her in her own troubles. And of late, since her life had become so happy and harmonious, she had considered Helen selfish for not entering fully into the happiness of herself and Axel. But in this moment Irma realized that she herself was the selfish one, and she reflected that it

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would be sad, indeed, if her happiness should have such an evil influence upon her. She decided in her heart that this must not be.

She looked over to Axel who was sitting opposite her. He nodded to her and his eyes flashed brightly. He deemed it a great privilege to sit once more as a scholar — he who now was a teacher of large classes of confirmation children.

“Isn’t it like meeting one’s old self from childhood days to sit here and feel how old thoughts and emotions surge up as living memories?” he whispered to Erick who sat by his side.

Erick nodded and smiled at the memories of his own youthful inexperience. He had grown much since then, he reflected complacently.

Now their old teacher and pastor stepped into the circle. He had aged considerably and his hair was turning gray; but the look in his eyes was just as warm and bright as of old.

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He had readily consented to Axel's plan for a reunion and now it pleased him greatly to find so many present. He cast his eyes upon each in turn and then his glance fell upon the empty chairs. Then he declared that each one of them had a place assigned in heaven and that they must all see to it that these places might not be vacant when their appointed time came.

"Jesus has gone to prepare a place for you, and He will return to take you unto Himself. Be ready for Him whenever He comes."

So their dear old pastor spoke, and then he again gave them the Bible verse which he had once before given them as a parting word: "*Hold fast that which thou hast, that no one take thy crown.*"

He spoke of all the new dangerous tendencies of the times, of all the misleading voices that were calling, and of the growing unbelief manifesting itself on all sides. At last he cried pleadingly:

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“‘Hold fast that which thou hast, that no one take thy crown.’ You have God’s word and promise of full salvation and life eternal through the blood of Christ Jesus. Let no one shake your faith, but trust in His promise. Hold fast to it, hide it in your hearts, and guard it well. May heaven and earth perish rather than God’s saving Word! If you have doubts as to this or that teaching in the divine revelation, banish such doubts by God’s own Word as Jesus banished satan from His presence. And when you suffer, when you are about to die, rest your soul on God’s precious promises and you will not be put to shame. ‘Hold fast that which thou hast, that no one take thy crown.’ *‘Be faithful unto death.’*”

When the reunion was ended, the former classmates parted from each other with evident reluctance, but they had still another bright and inspiring memory to carry with them on their way. They had caught a glimpse, as it were, through the

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very portals of eternity, and the crown of life had sent its shining message even to those who seldom or never thought of its priceless value. And those who were fighting the good fight of faith for the crown of life departed from the reunion cheered and strengthened for the conflict.

Hold fast thy crown!



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